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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: TUNISIA: THE AMBASSADOR'S CALL ON RULING PARTY  
CHIEF GHARIANI

REF: A. TUNIS 834  
[1](#)B. TUNIS 803  
[1](#)C. TUNIS 748

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) is focused on implementing President Ben Ali's 24 point governance plan, party Secretary-General Ghariani told the Ambassador on November 24. Drawing heavily from official rhetoric, the RCD leader asserted that Tunisia is a "harmonious" country where pragmatism trumps dogma, and development supersedes all other considerations. Leader of an omnipotent ruling party, Ghariani was dismissive of other parties as personality driven with weak institutions, while overlooking the Tunisian state's very active role in marginalizing and obstructing the opposition. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On November 24, the Ambassador called on Mohammed Ghariani, Secretary-General of the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), the party which has ruled Tunisia continuously (albeit under several different names) since independence in [1](#)1956. The meeting took place at RCD headquarters, a 22-story glass office building which dominates the skyline in downtown Tunis. In an office heavily bedecked with Ben Ali and ruling party paraphernalia, Ghariani extended the Ambassador a warm welcome and maintained a gracious, cordial tone throughout the meeting.

[1](#)3. (C) Ghariani told the Ambassador that, with the October elections now in the past, the RCD's principal focus was now on "making succeed" President Ben Ali's 24 point plan for governance in his fifth five year term. Drawing liberally from official Tunisian rhetoric, Ghariani stressed that Tunisia was a "harmonious" country. Tunisians believe in gradualism, and a collaborative, consensus-based approaches to problem solving, he underlined. Dogma takes a back seat to pragmatism in Tunisia, Ghariani asserted, with development being the "human right" most highly prized by Tunisians.

[1](#)4. (C) Ghariani said the RCD boasts a membership in excess of 2 million (in a country of less than 11 million). The RCD's massive size necessitated a complex organizational structure of various overlapping wings and layers. The party is divided into both geographic and demographic segments, Ghariani noted. RCD organizations exist at the national, provincial, municipal, and neighborhood level, and the party also groups members into active units of women, youth, students, professionals, business leaders, etc.

[1](#)5. (C) Ghariani cast the RCD as a pillar of Tunisia's effort to modernize society and resist Islamic fundamentalism. The RCD has been at the forefront of programs to integrate women into all professions and levels of Tunisian society and Tunisia's proud record of social achievement speaks for itself, he added. Though hesitant to characterize fundamentalism as an urgent threat to Tunisia, the phenomenon holds dangers for "all of us, everywhere," Ghariani thought.

¶6. (C) Asked about ties with U.S. political parties, Ghariani acknowledged that he had met in the past with representatives of both the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, but there were currently no active ties with either group. The Ambassador offered to facilitate contacts between the RCD and either or both party institutes, prompting non-committal thanks from Ghariani.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador also asked Ghariani about the RCD's contacts with Tunisia's opposition parties. Ghariani responded that the RCD had regular interactions with other political parties, which were usually very constructive, although some parties took a confrontational stance. (Note: All but three of Tunisia's legal political parties have been coopted, and are effectively controlled, but the GOT. Of the three independent parties, only one, the leftist Tajdid, is represented in parliament, with two of the 53 seats reserved for the opposition. The remaining 161 seats in parliament are held by the RCD. End note.)

¶8. (C) Ghariani attributed the weakness of opposition parties in Tunisia to their misuse and domination by leaders who saw them as platforms for individual advancement rather than institutions for national political development. Nonetheless, "the political process is advancing bit by bit in Tunisia," he asserted, "the Tunisian people understand this." Asked by the Ambassador for his vision of what the 2014 elections might look like, Ghariani said (only) that he was confident that multi-party politics were in Tunisia to stay.

¶9. (C) Comment: Though Tunisia is nominally pluralistic, the RCD conducts itself, and is structured, staffed, and funded as though it were a one-party state. While we do not disagree with Gariani's assertion that some Tunisian opposition parties seem hobbled by the egos of their leaders, the main reason for the marginalization of the opposition in Tunisia is the Ben Ali government's policy of active and continuous interference, intimidation, and obstruction (reftels). End comment.

GRAY